

# A REAL SOLUTION: Bringing Relief to Communities Through Highway-Rail – Grade Separations

## OVERVIEW

**A real solution** doesn't put a band-aid on a problem, it provides a lasting resolution. The increasing number of interactions between passenger vehicles and active rail lines in America is one such problem requiring a lasting resolution. Collisions, fatalities, chronic traffic congestion, increased pollution, train horn noise, delayed emergency response, freight and trucking impacts, and rail crossing violations — these are just some of the problems communities, commuters, and commerce face. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, there are over 211,000 active highway-rail grade crossings, and problems at these crossings continue to grow, resulting in compromised safety and negative economic impacts for Americans.

Billions of tax dollars have been invested to improve the flow of roadways on either side of at-grade crossings; however, the benefits from these roadway improvements cannot be fully realized unless the roadway is completely separated from the rails. The same is true for freight and passenger rail operations: billions in private investment by freight railroads are stranded by rail crossing incidents, track capacity constraints and other impacts. Investment in passenger rail services also suffers when crossing incidents keep commuter trains from meeting schedules.

The current pace of federal funding for grade separations makes relief elusive; it is time for a *real solution*. Grade separations can solve this problem. Optimizing the road network by eliminating at-grade crossings is only a fraction of the overall benefits that could be enjoyed on a national scale as a result of installing grade separations.

### Among the benefits of a **REAL solution**:

- ✓ **Improved safety** for motorists, pedestrians, train passengers and crews;
- ✓ **Improved emergency response time** for police, fire, and ambulances;
- ✓ **Reduced traffic congestion** for all;
- ✓ **Reduced vehicle emissions** as traffic moves more freely with active rail lines;
- ✓ **Increased predictability for passenger rail operations** by eliminating crossing conflicts;
- ✓ **Reconnected communities** by bridging the rail corridor;
- ✓ **Eliminated noise** from train horns at the crossing; and
- ✓ **Improved economies** by enabling commerce to flow more freely, from local truck deliveries to port and related freight traffic.

## PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

**A federal transportation safety grant program** targeted specifically to installing grade separations would eliminate safety risks of at-grade crossings; facilitate the ability of first responders to provide critical services to the public, unleash an aggressive improvement in local, regional, state, and national mobility; reduce air emissions and train horn noise; and improve the flow of commerce, thereby enhancing the quality of life for millions of Americans who interact with these crossings each day.

Grade-separations, where appropriate, provide lasting solutions that improve safety and facilitate the movement of goods that enhances the competitiveness of the nation within the global economy. Funding these improvements can prove challenging for state and local governments who need a strong federal partner to adequately address the safety

implications of interactions between rail and passenger traffic. Grade separations vary widely in cost and complexity, ranging from \$10 million in a rural area, to ten times that amount for larger, more complicated improvement projects. Whatever the price tag, the benefits of a safer and more optimized transportation network far outweigh the cost.

**Congress should establish a federal discretionary grant program,** with a 90 percent federal contribution, matched by a 10 percent local/state match, and the following considerations:

- **Any combination of city, county, regional, state or private sector funding** can be included to satisfy the matching requirement.
- **Project scoring** would be based on criteria including, but not limited to, average daily traffic and train counts; traffic incident data at the crossing; role of the project to complement the existing roadway network; and the percentage of funding match provided by non-federal partners.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) shall develop the project scoring criteria in cooperation with the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO), Association of American Railroads (AAR), Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO), National Association of Counties (NACo), National Association of County Engineers (NACE), National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), (National League of Cities (NLC), U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM), and other organizations (collectively referred to as the “Stakeholders”).

- **Project selection** should emphasize collaboration among cities, counties, regional, and state agencies and port/freight mobility communities (as applicable) to ensure the project is consistent with regional and statewide transportation planning priorities.
- **Program funding criteria** shall be determined by USDOT in collaboration with the Stakeholders.
- **Eligibility of program funding** shall be based on project scoring, to ensure that projects with the highest benefits are executed. This point notwithstanding, and no matter what level of government receives the funds, no state shall receive more than 7.5 percent of the allocation of program funds in a fiscal year.
- **Project design** is eligible for funding under the program.
- **A prioritized project list** of proposed grade separation projects should be assembled by each state, in coordination with the Stakeholders, to accelerate the program’s effectiveness. . The list should consider design; status of permitting; project costs; and community, transportation, and environmental benefits.

This program would offer a *real solution* by providing sufficient funding levels that will enable project design, construction, and completion for the many communities desperately seeking a solution. This program will also foster expedited or more predictable permitting, improve cooperation among local and state governments, and with the railroad industry, and create momentum for other projects that improve the livability of our communities and maximize the quality of life for all Americans.

## PROGRAM COST: \$25 Billion Over 5 Years

To accomplish this proposed real solution, the federal government should fund the grant program at \$5 billion per fiscal year sustained over five years. \$25 billion over five years would eliminate approximately 625 at-grade crossings currently compromising the safety of residents, limiting economic output, and inhibiting commerce across our nation.

After one year, an evaluation of the program should be conducted by the USDOT and reported to congressional committees of jurisdiction. Any program modifications stemming from this evaluation should be made in consultation with the Stakeholders.

## **PROPOSED INTERIM RESOLUTION DIRECTING CONGRESS TO ESTABLISH A DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROGRAM TO FUND THE ELIMINATION OF HIGHWAY-RAIL AT-GRADE CROSSINGS**

**Issue:** Collisions and fatality rates, chronic traffic congestion, increased pollution, train horn noise, delayed emergency response, freight and trucking impacts and rail crossing violations are a fraction of the impacts communities, commuters and commerce face as a result of at-grade separations between rail and passenger vehicle traffic. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, there are over 211,000 active highway-rail grade crossings in America. Left unaddressed, issues at these crossings will continue to grow resulting in compromised safety and negative economic impacts for Americans across the country.

**Proposed Policy:** NACo urges Congress to create a new discretionary grant program to address county concerns around at-grade crossings between rail and road traffic by providing federal funding to eliminate these crossings wherever possible.

**Background:** A substantial amount of taxpayer dollars have been invested to improve the flow of roadways on either side of at-grade crossings; however, the benefits from these roadway improvements cannot be fully realized unless the roadway is completely separated from the rails. The same is true for freight and passenger rail operations: considerable private investment by freight railroads has been made to move America's commerce safely, efficiently, and sustainably. Yet, these efforts are often hijacked by rail crossing incidents, track capacity constraints and other adverse impacts stemming from at-grade interactions. Public investment in passenger rail service also suffers when crossing incidents keep commuter trains from meeting schedules, or worse.

The current pace of federal funding for mitigating at-grade separations makes relief elusive. The band-aid approach has not worked; it is time for a real solution. Fortunately, grade separations can solve this problem. The cost of optimizing the road network by eliminating at-grade crossings is only a fraction of the overall benefits that could be enjoyed on a national scale as a result of installing grade separations.

**Fiscal/Urban/Rural Impact:** By eliminating obstacles to efficient freight movement, local and state economies, as well as the federal economy, is enhanced and improved.

**Sponsor:** James Healy, Board Member, DuPage County, Ill.